

'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'-- because thy neighbor is thyself; God is in both thee and thy neighbor, and both are in God. He who acts in this spirit need not fear that his acts will bind him to further existence."

--The Bhagavad Gita, trans. Franklin Edgerton, p. 165.

The Three Paths (margas)

The close alliance of Hindu thought and practice (belief and ethics) makes it difficult to neatly categorize aspects of its ethical system. This section focuses on the margas or paths taken to liberation; aspects of the varnashramadharma (vahrn-AHSH-rah-muh-DAHR- muh) system as a model for society; and the Bhakti (BUK tee) path.

The Hindu Social Vision Underlying the whole Hindu social system is the focus upon liberation (moksha.) The question "How can we seek liberation and still focus on the welfare of society?" becomes primary. Three paths (margas), the yogas ('YOH-guhs,' disciplines, techniques, 'yokes') of (1) knowledge, (2) action and (3) devotion, mark the ways to liberation.

Each path, like spokes on a wheel, is considered on an equal par with the others. Ethics becomes a matter of following the disciplines or duties involved in your chosen path, a "living up to the system." Underlying each path is a common ethical core which advocates self-control, non-violence, truthfulness, self-discipline, cleanliness and contentment. Hindus practice all three of these paths, just in differing degrees. Only when you talk to a person do you find out what degree of each he or she practices.

Gyana Yoga

Gyana yoga (jnana/gnana/yana). This path of knowledge is a difficult way, reserved for a select few. It requires a rare combination of rationality and spirituality. Based upon the Upanishads, it focuses upon interior knowledge and meditation.

Karma Yoga

Karma yoga. The path of Karma yoga, that of works or deeds, is the practice of many Hindus. Varnashramadharma describes the karma yoga model. **Dharma** (DAHR muh) depends on which **varna** (VAHRN-ah) one is born into and what **ashrama** (AHSH ruh-muh) one is in.

Varnas (VAHRN ahs). Four classes (varnas) make up this model for the social structure.

1. **Brahmins** (BRAH mihns). These people are the guardians of spiritual values, the religious teachers and priests. A required twelve years of study acquaints practitioners with the ritual and practice of this class.

2. **Ksatriyas** (KSHAT ree ahs). These are the rulers and warriors that oversee the land or kingdom. Eight years of study are necessary for members.

3. **Vaisyas** (VIS yahs). These people are the merchants. They control cash, agricultural produce and livestock. Vaisyas require four years of study.

4. **Sudras** (SOO drahs). These are serfs accorded service positions, being members of the lowest class.

Within the varna structure, every work, movement and exercise in living out the duties of the class one was born into becomes an exercise moving toward enlightenment. In reality, rather than the varna (class) system, jati (or class within a class) becomes the decisive factor in societal relations. Hundreds to thousands of these classes within the four major varnas divide society. **Rigid adherence to prohibitions and privileges within the jati structure is the present-day norm.** With contentment, patience and whole-hearted concentration, one focuses on his or her duties.

Ashrama. Hindu response to the question "When should I do what?" lies in contentedly practicing the ashrama ('AHSH-ruh-muh,' four stages--**student, householder, forest dweller, homeless wanderer**) of life.

The ideal for a **student** is to follow a dedicated regimen of ascetic and scholarly practice under the tutorship of a guru.

Householdership becomes a key stage in the whole system. Responsibilities to family, vocation and community occupy most of one's attention.

Then, at age sixty, a householder may escape to the **forest**. In this guilt-free, hermit stage of retirement, one seeks self-understanding and spiritual vision.

The last stage, that of renunciation (being a **homeless wanderer**), describes one who neither hates nor loves anything, someone who lives as identified with the eternal self.

The Four Goals. The doctrine of the four goals of life answers the questions "What should I do? What are legitimate things to follow?" In a sense, these goals serve in conjunction with the stages of life described above.

Artha (ahr-tah). Earning wealth, and economic/political activity, defines artha the first goal.

Kama (KAH-muh), the second goal, describes pursuit of sensual pleasures, especially those of romantic ecstasy. Cultivating aesthetic and sensual appetites becomes the objective.

Dharma. The third goal, dharma, the leading of a moral life, accentuates duty and willingness to serve.

Moksha. The last aim, that of seeking liberation (moksha), matches the practice found in one who reaches the final stage in life, that of renunciation. It is a release from the constrictions of this life.

Bhakti Yoga

Popular devotional worship is centered in the bhakti path. Bhakti does not seek an escapist, theistic retreat. Rather, it seeks implementation of universal virtues, and maintains a classless, egalitarian outlook.

Poet saints, while insisting on god's otherness, yet seek to adore him with every element of their being. Love, friendship, despair, and joy--emotional expressions of devotion--describe the feelings focused on god. Devotion, as offered to the gods Krishna (KRISH nah) and Kali (KAH lee), presents a strong, vigorous, all-consuming passion for the holy.

Krishna, with his symbolic flute, portrays the relationship of the worshiper with god as a riotous, festive, rollicking affair, filled with abandon, frenzy, and intoxicated delight. The universe and self are filled with bliss.

Kali--eerie, awesome, terrifying, wild, frantic and out of control--epitomizes the undomesticated, fearful aspects of the divine. Though appearing dangerous and frightening, Kali possesses an irresistible, attractive dimension. She may be "tamed" by simple, childlike devotion.

Images. Images move worshipers in the direction of god. Called visual "theologies" and "scriptures," images remind us that India is a "seeing" culture. The beautiful and sensuous, distressing and baffling combine to both confront and delight practitioners.

The primary element involved in the worship experience is faith. In concentration on the image, the worshiper becomes aware of the oneness of his/her atman with the universal brahmin. At the point of emancipation, that oneness overflows into the image. Put another way, a worshiper concentrates, extinguishing his/her ego. One's own realization is the focal point. Once recognizing the oneness of atman with brahmin, that awareness overflows to the image.

Hinduism is a democratic, process oriented religion. In choosing a god or many gods adherents are free to choose their own representatives of the Divine. Worshipers can call up a given god at a given time, without disbelieving in other gods.

Women in Hindu Thought

Hindu Practice. Throughout the Hindu tradition there seems to be an ambivalent attitude towards women. On the one hand, female gods--Devi, Sakti, Parvati, Durga and Kali--embody traits of energy, initiative and vitality which are active in the universe. Marriage and family are held in high esteem. Wives and mothers often are praised to excess. Even within the more negative aspects of the class system advocating traditional sex roles, female camaraderie, affection given by spouse, and respect bestowed wives, mothers and daughters bolstered the woman's position and role.

On the other hand, women often are seen as lustful temptresses, sinful enticements for otherwise chaste men. The lingam (phallic) symbol of Siva seems to promote an attitude of male dominance. Poor Indian women undergo the worst of burdens--poverty, "slavery," and general abuse. Though outlawed, the practice of sati (SUH-tee), where widows would burn themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, still casts a negative shadow. Also, the perception of females as instruments, subject to father, husbands and older sons is still common. (See Denise and John Carmody, *Ways to the Center*, p. 106.)

Vocabulary

Atman (AHT-muhn) The individual soul or life-force, eternal, indestructible...of the nature of pure being, consciousness and bliss...the essential nature of one's self.

Artha (ahr-tah) Earning wealth, and economic/political activity, defines this first goal of Hindu social life.

Ashrama (AHSH-ruh-muh) Hindu response to the question "When should I do what?" Contentedly following the ashrama (four stages--student, householder, forest dweller, homeless wanderer) of life is the way to liberation.

Bhakti yoga (BUHK-tee) Popular devotional worship. Poet saints, while insisting on god's otherness, yet seek to adore him with every element of their being. Love, friendship, despair, and joy--emotional expressions of devotion-- describe the feelings focused on god.

Brahmins (BRAH mihns) The guardians of spiritual values, the religious teachers and priests. A required twelve years of study acquaints practitioners with the ritual and practice of this class.

Dharma (DHAR mah) The leading of a moral life, accentuating duty and a willingness to serve, describes dharma, the third goal of Hindu social life.

Gyana yoga (jnana/gnana/yana) The path of knowledge reserved for a select few. It requires a rare combination of rationality and spirituality. Gyana yoga focuses upon interior knowledge and meditation.

Jati The class within a class. Jati becomes the decisive factor in Hindu societal relations. Hundreds to thousands of these classes within the four major varnas divide society.

Kali (KAHL lee) Goddess who is eerie, awesome, terrifying, wild, frantic and out of control. She epitomizes the undomesticated, fearful aspects of the divine.

Kama (KAH-muh) The pursuit of sensual pleasures, especially those of romantic ecstasy, describes the second goal of Hindu social life. Cultivating aesthetic and sensual appetites becomes the objective. Karma yoga The liberation path of works or deeds, which is the practice of many Hindus

Krishna (KRISH nah) God who, with his symbolic flute, portrays the relationship of the worshiper with the holy as a riotous, festive, rollicking affair, filled with abandon, frenzy, and intoxicated delight. The universe and self are filled with bliss.

Ksatriyas (KSHAT ree ahs) Rulers and warriors who oversee the land or kingdom. Eight years of study are necessary for members.

Moksha The seeking of liberation, a release from the constrictions of this life

Sati The practice, now outlawed, of Hindu women throwing themselves on their husbands' funeral pyre thus following their husbands in death.

Sudras (SOO drahs) Serfs accorded service positions, being members of the lowest class

Vaisyas (VIS yahs) Individuals who are merchants, control cash, agricultural produce and livestock. Vaisyas require four years of study.

Varna (VAHRN-ah) Social class

Varnashramadharma (vahrn-AHSH-rah-muh-DHAR-muh) The path to liberation which describes the karma yoga model.

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Resources for Further Study

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With pictures and narrative, this work discusses the visual nature of Indian religion.

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Engrossing work describing Kali and Krishna--Indian manifestations of God.

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Narajan, R.K., The Guide. NY: Penguin, 1988.

What a Delight! Few works of fiction engage the reader in the life of India better than *The Guide*.